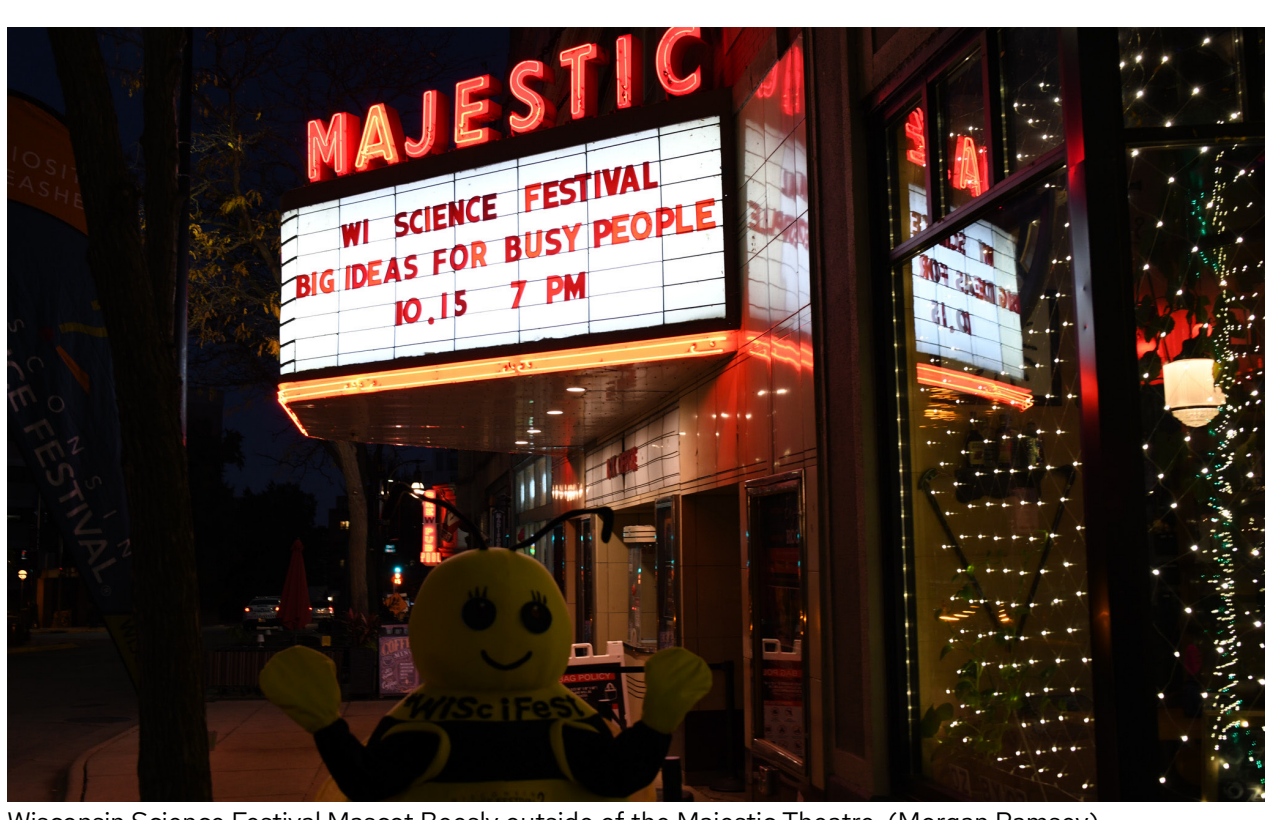


BIG IDEAS FOR BUSY PEOPLE: FIELDS OF WONDER

Greta Dietzler



Wisconsin Science Festival Mascot Beesly outside of the Majestic Theatre. (Morgan Ramsey)

On Tuesday October 15th, over 150 attendees had the opportunity to witness a celebration at the intersection of art and science. The Wisconsin Science Festivals was proud to present Big Ideas For Busy People: Fields of Wonder, an interactive event featuring a variety of talks, music, performances, and lively conversation. The Majestic Theatre in Madison served as the ideal backdrop for this fun-filled night centered on learning and engaging with science and the arts.



Fiddle musician Daithi Wolfe jams out as Beesly dances along. (Morgan Ramsey)

As guests arrived, they were able to hear the sounds of the event's resident fiddle musician, Daithi Wolfe, who serenaded and entertained them throughout the night with a variety of tunes, including traditional fiddle standards and inventive songs about science. Attendees were then welcomed with remarks by Eric Wilcotts, Dean of the College of Letters & Science at UW-Madison and fierce champion of the Wisconsin Science Festival, that set the tone for a wonderful evening.



(Left) Emcee and researcher, Ben Rush, welcomes the audience and sets the stage for the evening to come. (Right) LeClear, a radiation protection specialist, discusses 'modern alchemy.' (Arrowstar Photography)



Emcee Ben Rush, a researcher working on the UW-Madison campus and talented science improv performer, moderated the night and moved seamlessly between a variety of presenters. He opened the event by explaining its format: each presenter or performer had ten minutes on the stage, and if they went over, Daithi's fiddle would appear to play them off the stage! This set the tone for a night bursting with music and mischief. Rush then introduced the first speaker of the night!

DJ LeClear is a Senior Radiation Protection Specialist at SHINE Technologies. His vast experience with radiation protection and nuclear science shone through in his presentation: Nuclear: From Myths to Modern Magic. LeClear masterfully explored common misconceptions about nuclear technology, explaining its diverse applications in medicine, agriculture, and space. His presentation was capped with an exciting idea: how nuclear energy is similar to modern alchemy—transforming the world in surprising ways and advancing humanity to a prosperous future.



MUKULA Indian Dance dazzles the audience with their performance. (Arrowstar Photography)

LeClear's fascinating presentation was followed by a fabulous and fun performance by MUKULA Indian Dance. The Mukula team has showcased their performances at various prestigious events including the international festival at Overture Center, Rosemont Theater for the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, and Sun Prairie Multicultural Fair. For Big Ideas, their performance highlighted Kolattam, an ancient Indian folk dance practiced in south India performed by women using two short wooden sticks, one in each hand. This dance, which is usually dedicated to Hindu gods or goddesses and performed during harvest season and village festivities, connected to this year's festival theme of Agriculture in a new and exciting way. The group's engaging and vibrant performance captivated the audience.

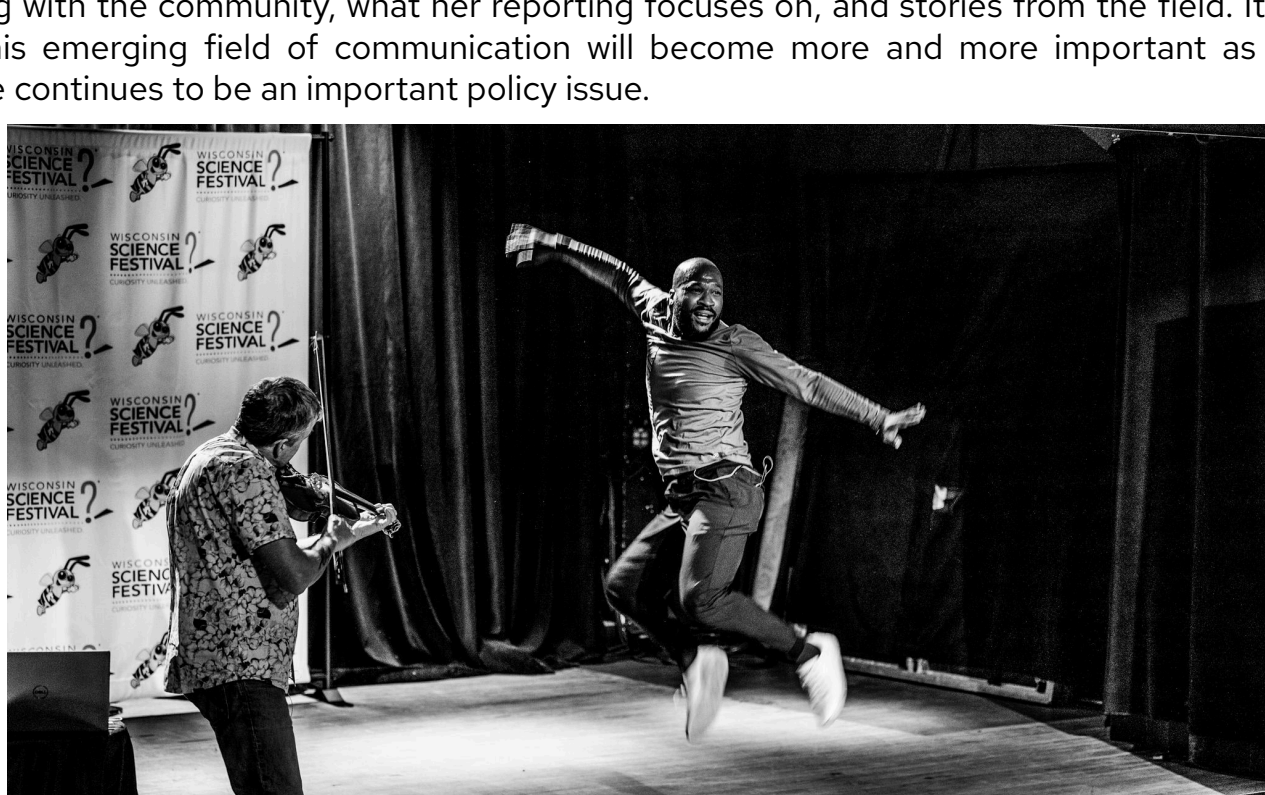


(Left) Researcher Ania Bialic discusses why we should care about parasites. (Right) Climate journalist Izzy Ross presents her experience in the field. (Arrowstar Photography)



Wolfe then ushered the audience into the second presentation of the night, given by Ania Bialic. Bialic, a researcher at UW-Madison who focuses on parasites and the diseases they cause, is also a passionate science communicator. Her presentation Why We Should Care about Parasites? addressed that commonly asked question in an insightful manner. As the audience learned, while there are some famed parasites like malaria, there are a wide array that have evolved throughout time. Because of this, their evolution can be studied and used for good in research and treatments of diseases. This engaging presentation shed new light on an already familiar topic and allowed attendees to get a better understanding of why we should all care about parasites!

Rush then transitioned the program to its third presenter, Izzy Ross. Ross is an accomplished climate journalist, who covers climate change in Northern Michigan and the Great Lakes. She was also the Science Journalist in Residence for Fall 2024 for UW-Madison Strategic Communications. Her presentation, much like her career, blended science and communication. She took the audience on her journey of how she first became involved in climate journalism, what it is like working in this emerging field of communication will become more and more important as climate change continues to be an important policy issue.



Guy Thorne, accompanied by Daithi Wolfe, brings the audience along for an interactive dance performance centered on agriculture and harvest. (Arrowstar photography)

Soon after Ross's presentation concluded, the audience was treated to a second dance performance by Guy Thorne. Thorne is an incredibly experienced and accomplished dancer, who currently works coordinating the Interdisciplinary Artist in Residence program at the University of Wisconsin's Division of the Arts. His background of work in many fields as well as choreography focusing on folklore, contemporary dance, and multimedia made him the perfect addition to the Big Ideas program. His performance, "Breadfruit Village," blended dance, poetry, and interactive elements to explore the themes of agriculture and community. One of the most interesting and engaging aspects of the performance were the many opportunities the audience had to be a part of it, through interactions like dancing and singing. Thorne's work is an example of the many different formats science communication can take.

The final presentation of the night, From Skynet to Smart Farms: Can AI solve our Food Crisis?, was given by Leah Elson, an experienced science communicator and critically acclaimed author. In fact, Elson's literary work, There Are (No) Stupid Questions... In Science was featured at this year's Wisconsin Book Festival in collaboration with the Wisconsin Science Festival.

Elson's presentation explored a variety of novel science approaches and research regarding AI as a tool to help in food crises. It was complimented by her engaging and conversational presentation style that lent itself well to a question and answer session with the audience.



(Left) Elson, a researcher and science communicator presents on the use of AI in agriculture. (Right) Presenters come together for a Q&A with the audience. (Arrowstar Photography)

As the Q&A wrapped up, Rush took the stage one last time to close out the night. An event with fun filled presentations and performances, Big Ideas has been a favorite of many festival goers for years for good reason: who doesn't love science presented in fun, engaging, and new ways!